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SMART CITIES AND DARK NEOLIBERALISM

LEXICON, MASHINES ASYMMETRISCHE AKTION, CITIES, CLOUD CITIES, DARK, FEATURED

As I was reading an article on the supposed hidden ideology underlying the rise of the Smart City on e-flux blog: [The hidden ideology behind the "smart city"](#) I kept thinking to myself:

Look at New York City for a model of the coming Smart City as total ubiquitous control, and then think John Twelve Hawks Fourth Realm trilogy. Already NYC is becoming the mecca for such ubiquitous smart worlds seamlessly enclosing its citizens in a web of intelligence that will think for them – watch them, protect them, imprison them for their own good... the Nanny Corporate City of the Future will do for you what you want do for yourself. A sort of Progressive City of Ethical Control bound only by the Imperialism of Economic Neoliberalist Stocks and Algorithmic Governmentality. Sadly this collusion of the Establishment Left/Right in Washington and in such corporate cities as NYC will become additive – adding such smart devices and upgrades over the coming decades. While in China or other sites it will become part of the galloping rise of all new cities.

This notion that we can intervene and shape this future seems iffy at best, because the very government that could intervene and do that through reform and regulation has as we see here in the U.S.A. vanished... with the divorce of Capitalism from Democracy (or, as here, the Federal Republic) the world will look more like China with a group of Oligarchic Overlords pushing agendas and guiding capitalism toward intensified obsolescence even as they marginalize humans for machinic life.

He says: "We will need to demand that the engineers who will craft the code that determines all the million material ways in which the networked city interacts with the people who live in it, and give it shape and meaning, are able to consciously articulate the things they believe (even, at the very most basic level, whether or not they conceive of the distribution of civic goods as a zero-sum game)." Problem here is that engineers work for fascist neoliberal corporations that rule as autarchies with top-down control over products and services, controlling through middle-management the very engineering process that has an in built design process that controls every aspect of what an engineer can and cannot do. The old days of a singular engineer enabled to change things is gone, now we live in multiplex teams that are defined by a well-organized neoliberal nexus of command and control techniques over every aspect of an engineers life at work. One would have to change the system that regulates the whole process of software development not the engineer, and to do that would mean a complete transformation of the Corporation as an entity and engine of neoliberal work and ideology. That's not going to happen overnight, and governments can't control that

process nor even have the intelligence to know where to begin... After 40 years in the biz as a developer, systems analysts, and software architect I've seen this process modified, adapted, revised, and honed down to a smooth working machine in most major corporations to the point that in-house development runs like clockwork – like a machine. This would be a hard nut to crack and change, and I doubt politics could do it even if it had the impetus to want too.

And, this begs the question of those who like Parag Khanna tell us in the coming decades, global competition will punish the sentimental. A society that could do something better but doesn't is either stupid or suicidal—or both. For political systems this means less emphasis on democracy and more on good governance. Success is measured by delivering welfare domestically and managing global complexity, not by holding elections. Such pragmatism opens the door to fruitful conversation over improving governance rather than presuming one end-state. Governance is more than a race to efficiency, but no Western government would be worse with a bit more emphasis on technocratic substance over democratic style.¹

For Khanna the Info-State – and, I would reduce that to the Parametric Assemblage – will more and more depend of expert decision making as the central motif of its overall capacity to compete on the world stage, along with provide the intelligence to overcome both environmental pressures and the typical problems of war, famine, and catastrophe. So the notion of the Technocracy as Info-State, an informed city of smart devices and AGI assemblages is coming to the fore in debates. As he puts it: "Direct technocracy is the superior model for 21st century governance. It combines Switzerland's collective presidency executive and multi-party parliament with Singapore's data-driven and utilitarian-minded civil service: A blend of technocracy and democracy, assisted by technology."

Patrik Schumacher, who has promoted what he terms "parametricism," not merely as a useful tool, but as the enabler of an entirely new kind of architecture, a new aesthetic sees society as a heterogeneous field of opportunity, saying: "The task is to develop an architectural and urban repertoire that is geared up to create complex, polycentric urban fields, which are densely layered and continuously differentiated."

Parametricism refers to a type of design process characterized by the interrelation of design variables (or, parameters) through computational tools and techniques; a definition that allows it to encompass the work of other well-known figures and firms as well as emerging practitioners in contemporary architecture and design. Beyond this very general technical definition, however, parametricism has also accrued currency to refer to a whole variety of ideas that animate design culture today, from those concerned primarily with aesthetic questions, to others that are more philosophical, and yet others with strong political agendas.²

Schumacher says of himself: "I myself was a Marxist from about 1985 to the late 1990s when I gradually started to shift more to the mainstream centre under the influence of Habermas, Luhmann and through my originally Marxist-inspired interest in postfordist socio-economic restructuring and new forms of business organisation. My writings from the late 1990s are still Marxist in bent but already betray my enthusiasm for the new business protagonists and processes and the new economic dynamism of postfordist capitalism. While the events of 2008 inspired many to turn against capitalism and to return to Marx, I was looking for new answers and discovered Austrian economics, i.e. the political economy of Ludwig von Mises and Friedrich von Hayek. Hayek was a key intellectual who helped to turn the ideological tide against socialism and inspired Thatcher's neo-liberal project of privatization. The political ideology and programme of Anarcho-capitalism envisages the radicalisation of the neo-liberal roll back of the state."

He envisions the cities of the future as self-sustaining environmental assemblages based on parametric design (The Parametric City):

Our technologically based world civilization has expanded its power of wealth creation to the point where it becomes its own barrier. We are finally compelled to recognize the finitude of our planet. Our world has shrunk to this single, fragile, shared "spaceship planet earth". Every new enterprise must now involve an additional reflective loop about its potential ecological consequences.

Cities are a crucial conduit of our global consumption of energy, air and water. Buildings consume energy and pollute during their life cycle as well as during their fabrication and construction. The ecological sustainability of our civilization depends upon our ability to find more intelligent and light-footed ways to harness and utilize the finite resources of our natural environment. This necessity imposes a new constraint upon the design of our built environment, not only in terms of new technology and innovative engineering solutions, but also in terms of the architectural order and stylistic expression of the built environment. However, the imperative of energy saving must *not* imply that the shutters are coming down. The task is to create cities that sustainably adapt to the natural environment *without* arresting the progressive, developmental thrust of our civilization.

Cultural advancement has to continue. This is not only an end in itself but the sine qua non of our continued survival on spaceship earth. Continuous technological innovation is a necessary precondition for our ability to ascertain our ongoing ecological sustainability. Therefore the tightening of ecological constraints that impose themselves upon the design of cities must not constrain the vitality and productivity of the life processes they accommodate. Cities must continue to provide the living conditions that are favorable to innovative work. Thus before we can fully address the question of how to optimize our cities in terms of environmental engineering we must answer the question which urban patterns and architectural morphologies are most likely to vitalize and advance the productive life and communication processes everything else depends upon.

Parametricism, he tells us, is gathering momentum to become the first new global, unified style that can and must replace Modernism as credible epochal style. Parametricism confronts both, the remaining vestiges of Modernism's monotony, and the cacophony of the urban chaos that has sprung up in the wake of Modernism's demise, with a complex, variegated order inspired by the self-organising processes of nature. The premise of Parametricism is that all urban and architectural elements must be parametrically malleable. Instead of assembling rigid and hermetic geometric figures – like all previous architectural styles – Parametricism brings malleable components into a dynamical play of mutual responsiveness as well as contextual adaptation. Key design processes are variation and correlation. Computationally, any property – positional, geometric, material – of any architectural element can be associated with – made the "cause" or "effect" of – any other property of any other element of the design. The designer invents and formulates correlations or rules akin to the laws of nature. Thus everything is potentially made to network and resonate with everything else. This should result in an overall intensification of relations that gives the urban field a performative density, informational richness, and cognitive coherence that makes for good legibility, easy navigation and thus quick, effective participation in a complex social arena where everybody's ability to scan an ever-increasing simultaneity of events and to move through a rapid successions of communicative encounters constitutes the essential, contemporary form of the cultural advancement.

In the above all the current ideological underpinnings of the neoliberal vision are incorporated and transformed by a vision of the coming informational society. As Adam Greenfield tells it "once you've accepted the fundamental terms of this bargain, there's not a whole lot of scope for the expression of values. You endorse the belief systems implicit in the loyalty scheme by participating in it, and your opportunity to reject those belief systems begins and ends with the right of refusal. In the case of the smart city, though, as with virtually all facets of metropolitan experience, the ambit of behavior and response is hugely more complicated. And this is where the largely preconscious values and conceptions of urban life held by such a system's designers come into play."³

These informational environments of the future, these "smart cities" will become more and more spaces of imaginal life, ones in which artificial-intelligence (AI) applications perform many tasks better than we can. As Floridi explains it we are becoming like fish in water, digital technologies are our infosphere's true natives, while we analog organisms try to adapt to a new habitat, one that has come to include a mix of analog and digital components.

We are sharing the infosphere with artificial agents that are increasingly smart, autonomous, and even social. Some of these agents are already right in front of us, and others are discernible on the horizon, while later generations are unforeseeable. And the most profound implication of this epochal change may be that we are most likely only at the beginning of it.

The AI agents that have already arrived come in soft forms, such as apps, web bots, algorithms, and software of all kinds; and hard forms, such as robots, driverless cars, smart watches, and other gadgets. They are replacing even white-collar workers, and performing functions that, just a few years ago, were considered off-limits for technological disruption: cataloguing images, translating documents, interpreting radiographs, flying drones, extracting new information from huge data sets, and so forth.

Digital technologies and automation have been replacing workers in agriculture and manufacturing for decades; now they are coming to the services sector. More old jobs will continue to disappear, and while we can only guess at the scale of the coming disruption, we should assume that it will be profound. Any job in which people serve as an interface – between, say, a GPS and a car, documents in different languages, ingredients and a finished dish, or symptoms and a corresponding disease – is now at risk.

These Neoliberal Utopias or Cloud Cities (i.e., total wireless environments or ubiquitous computing environments connected to the Cloud 24/7) will possess a fully integrated infrastructure, with smart transportation services (including autonomous vehicles), internet and communication systems, water services, and electrical and power grids all connected and unified. Such a massive, city-wide system will undoubtedly require significant upgrades in infrastructural computing power just to process the massive amounts of raw data. New algorithms and AI programs will each have their roles to play, and – like something out of an old science fiction novel – the largest cities may really come to have something like a "central computer," either distributed or localized.⁴

These neoliberal utopias will for the upper-classes seem like dreamlands, while for the workers and migrants to these smart oasis things may be quite different. Stephen Graham in *Vertical: The City from Satellites to Bunkers* envisions a world of privately controlled and surveilled archipelagos that secede from the street system, leaving it – metaphorically and, where the new system is raised up, physically – as a lower-status environment populated by those excluded from the new interior city.⁵ As one architect argues that these 'second-tier' cities with hyperfunctional connectivity over a plane vertically separated above or below the traditional street works to 'create an extreme form of stratification in a context better suited for mixture, the integration of people from all different races and classes.' Poor urban minorities, Terranova writes, have often been relegated to residualised and exteriorised street levels 'where retail has tended to languish and reserving the walkway system for white-collar workers.' (Vertical)

As Graham states it such vertical environmental contrasts are compounded by the ways in which private, vertically segregated pedestrian systems can become progressively delinked from surrounding sidewalks. Actual access from the public street often becomes increasingly tenuous as the self-perpetuating logic of extending interiorised commercial walkway systems grow horizontally over time. Entrances to the walkway system from the street below are mediated by access to securitised corporate

office buildings, elite condominiums or upmarket hotels. Commercial imperatives and a politics of fear, in other words, can result in pulling up the 'ladder' connecting the skywalk city to the street system. Linkages to the street, often already unsigned or inconspicuous, are closed, built over or replaced by connections through retailers or auto garages. Security guards and CCTV cameras provide intensified controls filtering flows between outside and inside. (Vertical, KL 3681)

In such a world the class divisions will become such that one imagines J.G. Ballard's *High Rise* which was a parodic take on the rise of 70's inner city condominium lifestyles. As Laing the main character in this satire admits "people in high-rises tended not to care about tenants more than two floors below them".⁶ And, as if already predicting the coming age of Smart Vertical cities Laing becomes aware of his predicament and nightmare:

As usual, though, the dimensions of the forty-storey block made his head reel. Lowering his eyes to the tiled floor, he steadied himself against the door pillar. The immense volume of open space that separated the building from the neighbouring high-rise a quarter of a mile away unsettled his sense of balance. At times he felt that he was living in the gondola of a ferris wheel permanently suspended three hundred feet above the ground. (Ballard, p. 14)

This sense of Vertical and Vertigo go hand in hand as the elite are forced ever upward in a maze of endless clouds and skyscrapers, while the workers like rats in a dark labyrinth are forced into the underworlds of such endless tunnels where populated to the max they begin to feed off each other in cannibalistic delight of consumer life without end. In such a realm the natural world has disappeared, even the occasional plant or tree is circumscribed and lifted high into the top-tiers where sun can still fall amid the chromium enclaves of the rich. But for the new urban peasantry all that remains is the slime molds of some strange undiluted acid pit in the unkempt streets far below the pyramids of light.

Chris Marker's *La jetée* (1962) opens in a post-apocalyptic future where surviving humans inhabit cramped underground spaces beneath destroyed cities in permanent exile from daylight. The authorities in this near future are desperately experimenting with primitive forms of time travel to locate help for their beleaguered existence. Part of the crisis is the deterioration and failure of memory in all but a few individuals. The protagonist, and subject of the experiments, has been chosen for the tenaciousness with which he has been able to retain an image from the past. Clearly, *La jetée* is not a story of the future but a meditation on the present, in this case the early 1960s, which Marker portrays as a dark time, shadowed by the death camps, the devastation of Hiroshima, and torture in Algeria. Like contemporary work by Alain Resnais (*Hiroshima, mon amour*), Jacques Rivette (*Paris nous appartient*), Joseph Losey (*These Are the Damned*), Fritz Lang (*Die Tausend Augen des Dr Mabuse*), Jacques Tourneur (*The Fearmakers*), and numerous others, the film seems to ask: How does one remain human in the bleakness of this world when the ties that connect us have been shattered and when malevolent forms of rationality are powerfully at work? Although Marker's answer to such a question remains unspecified, *La jetée* affirms the indispensability of the imagination for collective survival. For Marker, this implies a mingling of the visionary capacities of both memory and creation, and it occurs in the film around the image of the unsighted, blindfolded protagonist. Although most of the film, in its narrative context, consists of remembered or imagined images, one of its original premises is this model of a seer whose normative visual abilities have been deactivated in circumstances evoking the torture and inhumane medical experiments of the war and in the years that followed.⁷

As Crary defines it we are being re-ontologized, revised and remodeled by these very neoliberal processes that make up a 24/7 consumer society. He argues there is a broad remodeling of the dream into something like media software or a kind of "content" to which, in principle, there could be instrumental access. This generalized notion of accessibility derives from elements of popular culture that emerged in the mid 1980s in cyberpunk fiction, but which quickly saturated a broader collective sensibility. In various ways, there was a development of figures for new types of interfaces or circuits in which the mind or nervous system effectively linked up with the operation and flows of external systems. The idea of an actual neural connection to a global grid or matrix was, in most cases, a valorization of heightened states of exposure, whether to streams of images, information, or code. One effect of this imposition of an input/output model is a homogenization of inner experience and the contents of communication networks, and an unproblematic reduction of the infinite amorphousness of mental life to digital formats.

Richard K. Morgan's novel *Altered Carbon* (2002) can stand for a large category of current fiction in which individual consciousness can be digitized, downloaded, stored, installed in a new body, and have the ability to interface with boundless reservoirs of data. At the same time, narratives detailing such delirious levels of exposure are usually constructed as fables of empowerment, in spite of the extreme asymmetry between the individual and the inconceivable scale of "the grid." The lesson, in different guises, demonstrates how an entrepreneurial heroism is capable of surmounting this asymmetry and leveraging its incommensurabilities to one's individual benefit. The problem here is not to be construed as the permeability between some undefiled "inner life" and external techniques and processes. Rather, it is one sign of a larger tendency to reconceive all facets of individual experience as continuous and compatible with the requirements of accelerated 24/7 consumerism. Even though dreaming will always evade such appropriation, it inevitably becomes culturally figured as software or content detachable from the self, as something that might be circulated electronically or posted as an online video. It is part of a larger set of processes in which everything once considered personal has to be recreated and deployed in the service of adding dollar or prestige value to one's electronic identities. (Crary, KL 1131-1147)

As the outer and inner spaces change places, as we become more and more real in our external mirror worlds and our bodies de-materialize into dividual gleams of a neoliberal consumer machine where surplus labor and value give way to a 24/7

entertainment complex that extracts profit from our dreams rather than our physical work we will become literalized phantasms and copies of our cloned lifestyles, losing our grip on humanity and devolving into digital fragments of a totalized void. In such a world the original human gets lost in translation as it fragments into bits of data-foam which enters into new relations and mediations based not of reality but of the fantastic needs of a Smart City more real than the Real. In the end Homer has his revenge of Plato as the cave swallows both the sleeper and the awakened one in a cold dark chamber of absolute abstract light. The difference between night and day having been spliced out in an eternal now of cloudscares of energetic animations.

Utopia/Dystopia? Depends on which floor of the bad infinity one finds one's self. But then again, will one have a self to find?

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